

## Message Text

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ACTION NEA-09

INFO OCT-01 IO-10 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-03 H-02 INR-07

L-02 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06

AID-05 EB-07 AGR-05 PC-01 SIL-01 LAB-04 /087 W

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R 211045Z APR 75

FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 8238

USUN NEW YORK 1790

USMISSION FAO ROME

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FOLLOWING TEL SENT ACTION NEW DELHI INFO MADRAS AND BOMBAY ON  
APRIL 18, 1975. NOW REPEATED FOR YOUR INFO.

LIMITED OFFICIAL USE CALCUTTA 10884

E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: SWEL, EAGR, IN

SUBJ: WEST BENGAL AGRICULTURAL LABORERS: "IT REALLY BAFFLES  
UNDERSTANDING HOW DO THE AGRICULTURAL WORKERS CONTINUE  
TO SURVIVE"

REF: CALCUTTA 1904 (CALCUTTA: THE PAVEMENT DWELLERS)

1. SUMMARY: EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE WE COME ACROSS SOCIO-ECONOMIC  
STUDIES WHICH GIVE DEPTH AND MEANING TO THE ENDLESSLY REPEATED  
COMMENTS ABOUT INDIAN POVERTY, IN PARTICULAR ABOUT THE VERY POOR  
IN URBAN (REFTEL) AND RURAL SETTINGS. ONE SUCH STUDY WAS THE CAL-  
CUTTA METROPOLITAN DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY (CMDA)-SPONSORED SURVEY  
OF THE LIVES OF THE APPROXIMATELY 300,000 PAVEMENT DWELLERS OF  
CALCUTTA (REFTEL; ANOTHER IS THE ANZAL REVIEW OF LABOR PUBLISHED  
BY THE GOVERNMENT OF WEST BENGAL, LABOR DEPARTMENT. THIS CABLE  
SUMMARIZES WHAT THE ANNUAL SUMMARIES FOR 1973 AND 1974 SAY ABOUT  
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AGRICULTURAL LABOR IN WEST BENGAL. FOR THOSE READERS IN A HURRY,

PLEASE NOTE PARAS 7-9. END SUMMARY.

2. AS WE NOTED LAST FALL IN SEVERAL MESSAGES RELATING TO FOOD SCARCITY IN EASTERN INDIA, THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC GROUP MOST VULNERABLE DURING TIMES OF SHORTAGES, DROUGHT, FLOODS, ETC. WERE THE AGRICULTURAL LABORERS. THESE ARE RURAL DWELLERS MOST OF WHOM DO NOT OWN LAND. AS WE HAVE ALSO POINTED OUT, THERE WAS A STAGGERING INCREASE IN THE PERCENTAGE OF THE TOTAL POPULATION OF WEST BENGAL IN THIS AGRICULTURAL LABORER CATEGORY (VIS A VIS THE CULTIVATOR CATEGORY, I.E., THOSE WHO OWN LAND) BETWEEN THE 1961 AND 1971 CENSUSES. THIS IS WHAT THE LEFTISTS AND SOME CONGRESSMEN HERE CALL THE 'IMPAUPERIZATION' OF THE RURAL POPULATION. IT IS NOT SIMPLY MARXIAN OR FABIAN RHETORIC; IT IS HAPPENING.

3. ANYWAY, IN WEST BENGAL AS A WHOLE THERE WAS IN 1971 A TOTAL WORKING POPULATION OF 12.3 MILLION. OF THESE, 3.9 MILLION WERE CULTIVATORS, 3.2 MILLION WERE AGRICULTURAL LABORERS AND 5.1 MILLION WERE OTHER WORKERS (MOSTLY INDUSTRIAL LABOR), PERCENTAGEWISE, THAT'S ROUGHLY 32 PERCENT CULTIVATORS, 26 PERCENT AGRICULTURAL LABORERS AND 42 PERCENT OTHERS.

4. AVERAGE NUMBER OF WAGE EARNERS PER FAMILY ONE AND ONE HALF TO TWO; AVERAGE FAMILY SIZE FOUR TO SEVEN MEMBERS.

5. OF THE SEVENTEEN DISTRICTS IN WEST BENGAL, ELEVEN BOASTED HIGHER PERCENTAGES OF AGRICULTURAL LABORERS TO OTHER CATEGORIES OF WORKERS THAN THE ALL-STATE AVERAGE (26 PERCENT). BURDWAN (30 PERCENT); BIRBHUM (42 PERCENT); BANKURA (40 PERCENT); MIDNAPORE (34 PERCENT); HOOGHLY (30 PERCENT); 24-PARGANAS (28 PERCENT); NADIA (27 PERCENT); MURSHIDABAD (36 PERCENT); WEST DINAJPUR (28 PERCENT); MALDA (33 PERCENT); PURULIA (34 PERCENT). IN FACT, ONLY THE URBAN AGGLOMERATION OF CALCUTTA AND HOWRAH DISTRICTS AND THE EXTREME NORTHERN DISTRICTS (DARJEELING, JALPAIGURI AND COOCH BEHAR) WERE BELOW THE ALL-STATE AVERAGE.

6. MOST AGRICULTURAL LABORERS IN WEST BENGAL ARE EMPLOYED AS CASUAL LABOR; THEY WORK A NINE HOUR DAY AND, BESIDES THEIR WAGES (DISCUSSED BELOW) ARE GIVEN A SNACK (NOT A "MAJOR MEAL") OF MURI (PUFFED RICE), ROTI (INDIAN FLAT BREAD) OR RICE 'SOAKED WITH WATER OVERNIGHT.' THEY PLOUGH, HARROW, SOW, TRANSPLANT, WEED AND SPREAD LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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MANURE. MOST OF THE WORKERS ARE MALE.

7. OF THE FIVE DISTRICTS INTENSIVELY SURVEYED (ALL OF WHICH ARE BASICALLY ONE-CROP), THE FOLLOWING STAGGERING RESULTS WERE GATHERED: (A) THE AVERAGE NUMBER OF WORKING DAYS PER YEAR VARIED FROM A LOW OF 161 DAYS (BIRBHUM DISTRICT) TO A HIGH OF 219 DAYS (NADIA DISTRICT); (B) THE AVERAGE DAILY WAGE--IGNORING STATE LEGISLATION ON MINIMAL WAGES--PER WORKER VARIED FROM A LOW OF RS 2.03 (MALDA

DISTRICT) TO A HIGH OF RS.3.28 (JALPAIGURI DISTRICT); (C) THOSE FIGURES DIVIDED BY AVERAGE FAMILY SIZES IN THE DISTRICTS CONCERNED WORKED OUT TO A LOW OF 55 PAISA PER MEMBER OF THE FAMILY PER WORKING DAY (BIRBHUM) TO A HIGH OF 98 PAISA PER MEMBER PER WORKING DAY (JALPAIGURI); (D) TAKING THOSE SAME FIGURES CALCULATED FOR THE 365 DAY YEAR (THE PREVIOUS FIGURES WERE FOR WORKING DAYS ONLY), WE GET A LOW OF 24 PAISA PER DAY PER ANNUM (BIRBHUM) AND A HIGH OF 47 PAISA PER DAY PER ANNUM (JALPAIGURI).

8. IN AVERAGE ANNUAL INCOME AND PER CAPITA INCOME TERMS, THE FOLLOWING PICTURE EMERGES: (A) AVERAGE ANNUAL INCOME PER EARNER VARIES FROM RS.382 (OR ALL FAMILY RS.88 PER CAPITA) TO RS. 572 (OR ALL FAMILY RS.171 PER CAPITA) (B) THE STUDY POINTS OUT THAT THE PLANNING COMMISSION ESTIMATED THE POVERTY LINE AS RS. 20 PER MONTH IN 1961-62 PRICES (THAT IS, RS. 37.20 AT 71-72 PRICES). ON THAT SCALE, ALL FIVE DISTRICTS STUDIED FALL VERY FAR BELOW THE POVERTY LINE, INDEED AVERAGE MONTHLY PERCAPITA INCOME FOR AGRICULTURAL WORKERS' FAMILIES BEING AS FOLLOWS: RS.7.20 (BIRBHUM), 9 (MALDA), 11.40 (24-PARGANAS), 12.50 (NADIA), 14.10 (JALPAIGURI).

9. MONEY-LENDING: IT HARDLY NEEDS POINTING OUT THAT SUCH WAGE STRUCTURES LEAD RATHER DIRECTLY TO MONEY-LENDING RELATIONSHIPS, EVEN GIVEN CURRENT 'MODEST' PRICES FOR ESSENTIALS LIKE RICE. NINE OF TEN WORKERS REPORTEDLY TAKING LOANS DURING THE YEAR. IN CASH TERMS THE LOANS VARIED FROM RS. 400 TO RS. 830 AND IN KIND TERMS FROM ONE AND ONE HALF TO SIX MAUNDS (ONE MAUND EQUALS 37 KILOGRAMS). INTEREST RATES FOR CASH LOANS VARIED FROM SIX TO TWELVE PERCENT PER MONTH. THE REPORT SAYS, "IT IS OF INTEREST TO POINT OUT THAT LOAN IS USUALLY (REPAID) BY FREE LABOR, MONEYLENDERS BEING THE LAND-LORDS".

10. THE LABOR DEPARTMENT CLOSES ITS SUMMARY OF THE SURVEY, NOTING LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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THAT BECAUSE OF HIGH PRICES COUPLED WITH SCARCITIES OF ESSENTIAL FOODSTUFFS "THE DEPTH OF ABJECT POVERTY OF AGRICULTURAL LABORERS WITH ITS ATTENDANT SUFFERINGS AND AGONY IS BEYOND COMPREHENSION OF (THE) URBAN POPULATION".

11. COMMENT: DRAWING BACK FOR A MINUTE AND ASSESSING THE SOCIAL LANDSCAPE OF WEST 3, & -, IT IS NOT DIFFICULT TO SEE WHY THE EXTREMELY IMPOVERISHED AND DEBT-RIDDEN LANDLESS LABORERS ARE NEITHER ARTICULATE NOR ASSERTIVE. WHEN REPORTING ON THE ACUTE FOOD SCARCITY SITUATION WHICH PERTAINED IN THE AUGUST-NOVEMBER PERIOD IN WEST BENGAL AND ASSAM, WE NOTED CONTINUALLY THE LACK OF PURCHASING POWER OF THE VERY POOR. THE PRECEDING SUMMARY MAKES IT CLEAR HOW LOW THAT PURCHASING POWER IS EVEN WHEN EMPLOYMENT IS AVAILABLE. IN PERIODS OF DROUGHT OR FLOOD, ETC., WHEN THERE IS NO EMPLOYMENT FOR THE AGRICULTURAL LABORER CLASS, "IT REALLY Baffles

UNDERSTANDING HOW DO THE AGRICULTURAL WORKERS CONTINUE TO SUR-  
VIVE" (AS THE REPORT COMMENTS. IT ALSO HELPS EXPLAIN WHY THERE  
APPEARS TO BE LITTLE ASSERTIVELY REVOLUTIONARY FEELING AMONGST  
THE SOCIAL GROUP (CALCUTTA 1824, 2138) AND WHY THEY EVEN CHOOSE  
TO COME TO CALCUTTA TO SLEEP ON THE STREETS (CALCUTTA 1904).  
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## Message Attributes

**Automatic Decaptioning:** X  
**Capture Date:** 01 JAN 1994  
**Channel Indicators:** n/a  
**Current Classification:** UNCLASSIFIED  
**Concepts:** AGRICULTURE, LABOR FORCE, AGRICULTURAL WORKERS  
**Control Number:** n/a  
**Copy:** SINGLE  
**Draft Date:** 21 APR 1975  
**Decaption Date:** 01 JAN 1960  
**Decaption Note:**  
**Disposition Action:** RELEASED  
**Disposition Approved on Date:**  
**Disposition Authority:** GarlanWA  
**Disposition Case Number:** n/a  
**Disposition Comment:** 25 YEAR REVIEW  
**Disposition Date:** 28 MAY 2004  
**Disposition Event:**  
**Disposition History:** n/a  
**Disposition Reason:**  
**Disposition Remarks:**  
**Document Number:** 1975NEWDE05326  
**Document Source:** CORE  
**Document Unique ID:** 00  
**Drafter:** n/a  
**Enclosure:** n/a  
**Executive Order:** N/A  
**Errors:** N/A  
**Film Number:** D750139-0599  
**From:** NEW DELHI  
**Handling Restrictions:** n/a  
**Image Path:**  
**ISecure:** 1  
**Legacy Key:** link1975/newtext/t19750432/aaaabeal.tel  
**Line Count:** 175  
**Locator:** TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM  
**Office:** ACTION NEA  
**Original Classification:** LIMITED OFFICIAL USE  
**Original Handling Restrictions:** n/a  
**Original Previous Classification:** n/a  
**Original Previous Handling Restrictions:** n/a  
**Page Count:** 4  
**Previous Channel Indicators:** n/a  
**Previous Classification:** LIMITED OFFICIAL USE  
**Previous Handling Restrictions:** n/a  
**Reference:** 75 CALCUTTA 1904  
**Review Action:** RELEASED, APPROVED  
**Review Authority:** GarlanWA  
**Review Comment:** n/a  
**Review Content Flags:**  
**Review Date:** 22 APR 2003  
**Review Event:**  
**Review Exemptions:** n/a  
**Review History:** RELEASED <22 APR 2003 by GolinoFR>; APPROVED <13 MAY 2003 by GarlanWA>  
**Review Markings:**

Margaret P. Grafeld  
Declassified/Released  
US Department of State  
EO Systematic Review  
05 JUL 2006

**Review Media Identifier:**  
**Review Referrals:** n/a  
**Review Release Date:** n/a  
**Review Release Event:** n/a  
**Review Transfer Date:**  
**Review Withdrawn Fields:** n/a  
**Secure:** OPEN  
**Status:** NATIVE  
**Subject:** WEST BENGAL AGRICULTURAL LABORERS: "IT REALLY BAFFLES UNDERSTANDING HOW DO THE AGRICULTURAL WORKERS CONTINUE  
**TAGS:** SWEL, EAGR, IN  
**To:** STATE  
**Type:** TE  
**Markings:** Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 05 JUL 2006